

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: May 10, 2011

Agenda Item: 2012 Proposed Wolf Season, Quotas and WMU Boundaries

Division: Fish & Wildlife

Action Needed: Approval of Proposed Rule

Time Needed for Presentation: 1 hour

Background: Regulated public hunting and trapping of wolves was endorsed by the Governor's Wolf Advisory Council in 2000 and is included in Montana's wolf conservation and management plan. The FWP Commission adopted a conservative hunting-only quota of 75 wolves for the 2009 season. That wolf hunting season closed with a legal harvest of 72. The minimum wolf count increased in 2009 from 497 to 524 wolves. For the 2010 season (blocked by court ruling) the Commission adopted a statewide quota of 186 with 13 wolf management units (WMU's). The 2011 season had a statewide hunting-only quota of 220 wolves with 14 WMUs. Modeling predicted harvest equal to this quota would result in up to a 25% percent reduction from the 2010 minimum of 566 to 425. Including a season extension to February 15, 166 wolves were harvested with three of the 14 WMU's closing due to their quota being met. Forty five wolves taken after December 31 were not subtracted from the year end minimum count of 653 wolves.

Four hundred twenty five wolves remains a season objective. Modeling suggests harvest up to 377 wolves would not reduce the population below 15 breeding pairs and predicts 490 wolves as a resulting minimum. Given that, and experience gained from previous seasons, there appears ample opportunity to simplify harvest regulations in pursuit of increased harvest. Some WMU boundaries and descriptions are modified in this proposal. The framework includes a general season rather than a fixed statewide quota with the exception of two quota areas near Glacier and Yellowstone National Parks. Mandatory harvest reporting within 24 hours is proposed to maintain management capacity for assessing harvest with updates provided to the Commission, along with a mechanism to implement season closures.

FWP proposes the 2012 wolf hunting season to run from the start of archery (Sept 1) to Feb 28. Trapping, to include required trapper orientation, mandatory trap-check and defined equipment for foothold traps (no snares), is proposed from Dec 15 to Feb 28. Incidentally captured wolves may be potentially collared and released in conjunction with FWP if uninjured. With this proposal, hunters and trappers could take only one wolf currently but up to three if the 2013 Legislature modified existing statute. Similarly, electronic calls for hunting are currently not allowed but would be authorized if existing statute was modified. Objectives of the wolf harvest season remain: 1) maintain a viable and connected wolf population in Montana; 2) gain and maintain authority for Montana to manage wolves; 3) maintain positive and effective working relationships with livestock producers, hunters, and other stakeholders; 4a) reduce wolf impacts on livestock; 4b) reduce wolf impacts on big game populations; 4c) maintain sustainable hunter opportunity for wolves; 4d) maintain sustainable hunter opportunity for ungulates; 5) increase broad public acceptance of sustainable harvest and hunter opportunity as part of wolf conservation; 6) enhance open and effective communication to better inform decisions and; 7) learn and improve as we go. NOTE: Contingent upon potential statute adjustment, this proposal would accommodate a three-wolf bag limit and electronic calling at the time of any final legislative passage. Retrieval of harvested wolf parts must be consistent with statute.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Public comment would run through 5:00 PM Monday, June 18. Final adoptions are scheduled for July 12, 2012. Public meetings will be held in Regions 1 – 5.

Alternatives and Analysis: Except for two areas near national parks, fixed quotas are not proposed as experience has shown that they have not affected management objectives. Harvest monitoring remains.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: The proposal is aligned with known biology, management history and experience, survey efforts, and public comment. This proposal is consistent with other species proposals and continues to value wolves as an integral component of functioning ecosystems.

Proposed Motion: I move to adopt the proposed 2012 wolf season as presented by FWP to include later adjustments to bag limit (3 wolves) and electronic calling if possible statutory adjustments allow.